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Was CIA Right?
The Communist Manpower Controversies of 1967-68

Introduction

In 1967, CIA began a major analytical examination of the basic data on the Communist manpower commitment in South Vietnam. This effort was undertaken because of an increasing awareness among experts here in Washington that the estimates being developed by specialists in MACV had serious shortcomings. Some of these shortcomings arose from problems associated with the data themselves -- little of which could be assigned a high order of validity. Other shortcomings, in CIA's judgment, arose from the fairly rigid methodological approaches taken by MACV analysts. During 1967 and 1968, CIA probed the data base and developed new methodologies for ~~approaching~~ ^{handling} the old problems. A whole series of independent estimates emerged from this effort, encompassing such categories as ~~main and local~~ ^{regular} combat forces, administrative services, guerrilla and other irregular forces, and the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI).

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The CIA estimates led in early 1968 to an intensive community-wide reexamination of the whole manpower question, a reexamination which became, in effect, an ongoing procedure including periodic analyst-level exchanges and annual conferences at which efforts have been made to reconcile differences and to reach agreement on manpower estimates. The major differences between the MACV and CIA estimates had largely disappeared by 1969 in the critical category of combat order-of-battle. Major differences on administrative services had been largely reconciled by 1971. The guerrilla estimates have never been fully reconciled, but with the decline in the overall guerrilla force level in South Vietnam, these differences have lost their importance. Shortly after CIA began its analyses of trends in the manpower categories -- other irregular forces and the VCI -- MACV concluded that there was sufficient information to continue to make new estimates on these subjects. Neither MACV nor CIA has attempted to develop current estimates in the last year or so.

It is very easy to overdramatize the causes and relevance of the differences between MACV and CIA. The manpower data on the war in Vietnam have always been open to a fairly wide range of interpretations, few of which

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can be categorically dismissed as without some claim on validity. Furthermore, it is too simplistic to say that one methodology which, retrospectively, appears to have given the best answers was therefore manifestly the best approach at the time. In the following review of the basic differences between MACV and CIA, we can demonstrate instances where the CIA approach appears now to have been the better one. In other instances, it is likely that we shall never know. But all things considered, the testing and probing procedures undertaken in 1967-68 by both MACV and CIA represent the quest of intelligence at its best.

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